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ABSTRACT

A child's sense of involvement in story and desire to meaningfully experience literature must be sustained and promoted if the problem of "literacy" is to be resolved. Four activities, designed as a series of stages, can enhance the literary experience of children. The first activity is reading to children--exposing them to the language stimulation of verse, prose, unique literary styles, and artistic reflections, providing them with an enthusiastic model of involvement, and personalizing the literary encounter. The second activity motivates involvement by providing an appropriate environment--presenting an exciting introduction to or reading an intriguing excerpt from a story. The third activity is guiding the literary encounter to alert children to character development, different story events, cause and effect relationships, further analysis, and information processing activities (an example of guided reading is used with the story, "Julie of the Wolves"). Ultimately children should formulate their own guide questions and frameworks for analysis. The fourth activity involves promoting a response to the literary experience by asking intellectual-affective questions which require comparative judgment and clarification. Asking which book was most exciting, pleasurable, thoughtful, or memorable, and what makes a book worth reading can help children make decisions about the quality of their encounters so that valued experiences may be sought again. (AEA)

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Active Participation in the Literary Encounter

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Active Participation in the Literary Encounter

Too many times we have assumed somehow that to teach the technical skills of reading would resolve the problem of "literacy" in modern society while, in fact, what is necessary is that we sustain and enhance the children's sense of involvement in story and promote the desire to experience literature as a meaningful encounter. Unfortunately, we are well aware of the overwhelming number of children and adults who do not become involved in literature, individuals who, in fact, purposely avoid literature. Yet, for many of us, there are still limitless opportunities for stimulating the literary encounter and connecting children with literature. What is necessary, therefore, is a renewed emphasis on a process which encourages children's active participation in the literary encounter.

The purpose of this paper is to present four major literary activities designed to enhance the literary experience of children. These activities, described as a series of stages, include 1) reading to children, 2) motivating involvement with literature, 3) guiding the literary encounter, and 4) promoting a response to the literary experience. The activities should be seen as progressing from simple to complex while also being adaptable to various levels of childhood understanding and experience. The underlying assumption of this presentation is

that learning comes through guidance and we can best guide children into literature through an active encounter with the literature.

As a first stage, reading to children is one of the most important ways to involve them in literature. Clearly there is much to be gained by children exposed to the language stimulation of verse, prose, and unique literary styles. Further, there is much to be gained as vicarious experience from the range of picture books which provide the child with an artistic reflection of the language and content of story. Even to read aloud titles, for example, Suppose You Met A Witch (Serraillier, 1973) and The Old Woman Who Lived in a Vinegar Bottle (Godden, 1970), incites a curiosity while such works as The Bat-Poet (Jarrell, 1963) and Knee-Knock Rise (Babbitt, 1970) offer a pleasurable suspense and an opportunity for insight. Yet, even if there were no "practical" knowledge or experience to be gained through reading to children, the joy of the encounter, the bringing together of child and story, would still serve as a source of satisfaction, for we suspect that part of the avoidance of literature lies with never having experienced literature as a source of pleasure.

Reading aloud to children offers a splendid opportunity for personalizing the literary encounter and providing an enthusiastic model of involvement for the young reader. It is not hard to imagine, for instance, the symbolic integration, the togetherness, of reader, book, and child when children are presented with Suppose You Met A Witch (Serraillier, 1973):

Suppose you met a witch...There's one I know,

all willow-gnarled and whiskered head to toe.
We drowned her at Ten Foot Bridge
last June, I think --
but I've seen her often since at twilight time
under the willows by the river brink,
skimming the wool-white meadow mist
astride her broom o'beech.

Read with a sense of suspense, children are seized by the anticipation of language and guided by the visual image of illustration. Then, at the conclusion of the encounter, the reader and the children can share the joy of their experience. Finally, since the range of encounters is limitless and the consequences of such significance, reading to children must become a primary activity of the literary involvement process. (An excellent, yet brief, description of reading to children and its consequences is Shumaker, 1975; guidance in selecting books for reading to children can be found in Huck, 1976; and some conclusions of research in this area are in Cullinan, 1972.)

A second stage for stimulating literary involvement might be seen as offering "a glimpse of the future" as a form of motivation. In the natural course of providing children with an appropriate environment for experiencing literature, we will undoubtedly surround them with books and allow their interests to lead them through various encounters with books. Yet even with the best environment, children's desires, interests, and sources of motivation are limited by their prior experience and they may readily avoid many unexplored

areas of the literature. Hence, "a glimpse of the future" is merely a calling card for a form of motivational guidance designed to further expose children to literature and stimulate their involvement. For example, although it is helpful to make available such fascinating titles as How to Eat Fried Worms (Rockwell, 1973) and Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing (Blume, 1972), presenting an exciting introduction to or reading an intriguing excerpt from a piece of literature offers children a glimpse of what may be theirs for the asking. This process may be as simple as asking such anticipatory questions as, "Can you imagine finding an old treasure map and then battling against the forces of evil while hunting for the treasure? Well, I wonder if the Drew children ever found their secret treasure 'over sea, under stone' in Susan Cooper's book (1965)?" Or we may draw the children well into a story by reading to them, for instance, the first chapter in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Lewis, 1950), and then allowing them to continue the quest alone. The point is to offer children a glimpse of the future in literature and to allow them to decide which path to take.

The third stage of the process for involving children with literature is guiding the literary encounter. This stage is particularly important because it is designed to guide children in examining various aspects of a story while simultaneously reading in order to gain further understanding and to increase the intensity of the encounter. It is an attempt to provide children with a guide which alerts them to particular aspects of character development, leads them to compare

different events and circumstances, draws them toward cause and effect relations, prepares them for further analysis, and provides an opportunity for any number of information processing activities. This guiding activity removes the literary experience from the superficial reading of words and allows children to experience literature as an intellectual-effective encounter.

This guided reading of literature may be used initially with the oral activities of reading to children and later as part of an independent reading program with careful attention given to the learning stages of particular children. Further, the guided reading process should be seen as a necessary stage preceding the various possibilities for response to literature. Whatever the case, the following should serve as an example of the guided reading for Julie of the Wolves (George, 1972).

Guided Reading: Julie of the Wolves

Story: The story you are about to read concerns a young Eskimo girl who runs away from her home and finds herself lost on the North Slope of Alaska with winter rapidly approaching. Julie's attempt at survival leads her to a new understanding of her world and perhaps your experience with Julie will aid your own understanding of life.

Guide: The following suggestions/questions may be useful in coming to understand Julie.

1. As Julie struggles against her environment, try to imagine the sort of wilderness in which she finds herself. Visualize the scene in your mind -- the color of the scene, the shape of the land, the mood of the moment, the feel of Julie's environment. Then follow the change

created by the author's description.

2. As Julie is drawn to the wolf pack by her need for survival, she learns the ways of the wolf. Why, in particular, does Julie need to understand Amaroq, the wolf?

3. As you begin to identify with Julie's interest in the wolf pack, you can begin to sense her reasoning and judgment. For instance, how does Julie establish a relationship with the wolf pack? How does the relationship change with time?

4. As the story progresses, what sort of relationship grows between Julie and Amaroq?

5. Before you begin "Part II Miyax, the Girl," take a moment to think about Julie (Miyax) and her struggle for survival. How might you describe her experience; what qualities does she exhibit; what insights concerning life might you infer?

To find out more about "Julie of the Wolves," read on.

While this example only parallels one part of the story, it does suggest the intention of the activity. For instance, the guides should begin simply by focusing the reader's attention on plot or character development. Later the guides may develop increasing complexity; in which case, focus may be on the interaction of plot and character which synthesizes into thematic concerns. Ultimately the children should be aided in formulating their own guiding questions and framework for analysis as they read. Guidance through the literary encounter clearly offers greater involvement and reward in literature than merely asking questions

after the fact. (For further discussion of guided reading and questioning, see Herber, 1970; Sanders, 1966; Hunkins, 1976; Huck, 1976.)

Promoting a response to the literary experience serves as the fourth stage of activities. While the guiding stage provides the framework for various information processing activities simultaneously with the act of reading, the responding stage deals primarily with the intellectual-affective "impact" of the literature which we explore in a more external, after the fact, fashion. Basically, the activity involves children not only in "communicating" the information gained and interpretation made but also in "valuing" the quality of the experience and in "evaluating" the significance of the literary work. Reviews of events, questions, or statements which elicit judgments may be used to consider the value of a certain character's thoughts, words, or deeds, the possibility of responding to particular circumstances in a variety of ways, and the possibility of comparing and judging various characters, actions, and events. For example, again with reference to Julie of the Wolves, we might explore the different images of Julie's father, Kapugen, and the relationship of those images to particular circumstances. In this case, both the communicating and valuing aspects of response could be examined by role-playing activities, by writing alternate endings to certain episodes or the story itself, and by comparing character and conditions, thereby assessing the quality of character.

The process suggested here is clearly one of examining the reader's emotive impressions of characters and their behavior. It is an evaluating of both situational and principled

behavior (a type of values clarification) from an attitudinal perspective. Yet, on a more critical level, for instance, it is the consideration of how a variety of conditions affect the values, attitudes, and behavior of characters in literature, and how, in turn, this sense of understanding, combined with the initial "gut" reaction, might affect the reader. Ultimately this type of responding process may serve a particularly useful purpose since determining the basis for judgment enhances awareness of values in the children and in the literature. (For an interesting view of children's literature as "issues," see Rudman, 1976.)

The final aspect of response involves evaluating the literary experience. Essentially the issue here is one of determining the value of the encounter, the consequence of the experience, and of deciding, in reference to a number of literary works, what enhances the quality of the experience. We are asking children to respond to particular experiences gained in the literary encounter through intellectual-affective questions or statements which require a comparative judgment and a clarification of judgment. For example, in reference to a particular work such as the Lemming Condition (Arkin, 1976) we might ask if the experience aided our understanding of "the lemming condition" and of ourselves, if the experience was satisfying, and, if so, what made the book worth reading. In reference to a number of works, we might ask which book was most exciting or pleasurable or thoughtful or memorable and what makes a book worth reading (Babbitt, 1975). There are, of course, many possibilities for evaluating the literary encounter

from both the perspective of the children and the concern of the teacher; yet, whatever the approach, it seems particularly important that children make decisions about the quality of their encounter in order that those experiences which are most valued may be sought again. (For a brief, yet valuable, introduction to evaluation at an advanced level, one that may aid the teacher's analysis, see McGuire, 1973.)

There are, of course, any number of possibilities for introducing literature to children in a manner which promotes their active involvement. The process of engagement suggested in this paper was developed through four stages. These stages are not an end in themselves; rather, they are a possible means for bridging the gap between the curiosity of children and the world of literature.

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